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SUBJECT: DO NOT INTERVENT IN OUR AFFAIRS: GOE LAYS DOWN A MARKER

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Mike Gonzales and Public Affairs Officer Alyson Grunder met with the Director of the Office of Government Communications Affairs, Minister Bereket Simon, on September 4 to discuss two opinion pieces published in the state-owned Amharic language Addis Zemen newspaper condemning USAID's interventions in Ethiopia's internal affairs. The op-eds claimed that USAID had been engaged in illegally providing support to Ethiopian media organizations, among other allegations. While Bereket, and his associate Shimelis Kemal, claimed that they did not have advance knowledge of the Addis Zemen articles, they voiced their strong objections to what they deemed to be USAID's "unwarranted intervention" with the media. Bereket stated that foreign governments must inform and receive permission from the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) regarding any assistance provided to media organizations -- or any Ethiopian entity -- and stressed that assistance to media outlets beyond the scope of "capacity building" is prohibited by law. Most media and diplomatic contacts feel the ruling party used the op-eds to send a message to Ethiopians that they should not seek the assistance of the international community to open political space and to warn donors as the country moves closer to elections in 2010. Post prepared "if asked" guidance to respond, which has been used almost in its entirety in both the English and Amharic versions of the private newspaper The Reporter. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2. (U) On August 29 and September 1, the state-owned Addis Zemen newspaper ran a two-part opinion editorial, "USAID's Shameful Interference in the Ethiopian Media" under a pseudonymous byline alleging that the U.S. Agency for International Development had convened a group of journalists representing exclusively private media organizations and offered financial support for coverage of the 2010 Ethiopian elections. According to the articles, a representative of USAID had expressed concern that the elections would not be free and fair because of the narrowing of democratic space in Ethiopia, and encouraged the press to focus urgently on the upcoming election. According to the article, the USAID representative, said that "money was no object as long as well presented project proposals are submitted to USAID." The articles implied that USAID is trying to foment another "Orange Revolution," such as foreign agencies had successfully supported in the Ukraine. Private media outlets were portrayed as traitors to their country, greedy for "alms in return for the sale of the pride and sovereignty of Ethiopia." This criticism mirrored earlier leveled at local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were accused of providing false information for the 2009 State Department Human Rights Report.

13. (U) The Media Forum (MF), that hosted the meetings condemned in the Addis Zemen pieces, was first convened in late 2006 by the U.S. Mission with the strong support of the GoE; it has been supported since by USAID through the Constructive Dialogue Initiative of Pact, a USAID-funded NGO. Representatives from USAID and the UK Foreign Office participated in two donor meetings with the Media Forum on August 19 and 26, as follow-ups to commitments to focus resources on election media issues at a donors' workshop on the elections in late May 2009. USAID contacted the MF Steering Committee (SC) to discuss when and how to bring consideration of possible donor election-related capacity building assistance to the broader Forum membership. It was agreed that the SC would invite a select group to a lunch meeting and circulate a set of questions beforehand to help focus preparatory thinking. At the first meeting, both USAID and UK representatives said that resources were available to both government and private media professionals, outlets and associations to support capacity building for improved coverage of the 2010 elections. After the August 19 meeting, the UK circulated a list of possible program support areas; a UK Embassy PolOff also met Minister Bereket to discuss working with the media on election issues and advised him that we had begun discussions with stakeholders.

14. (U) At the second meeting with the Media Forum membership on August 26, UK and U.S. representatives were joined by a representative of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, a non-profit German political and public policy foundation. Each of the media participants reported on their needs and the support that interested them, ranging from training to funding, and from pure reporting skills improvement to the management of candidate debates. All three funding agencies clarified that direct cash transfers

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would not be possible and that technical assistance and support for trainings and media events could only be provided through in-kind donations.

MEETING WITH BEREKET

15. (SBU) In the September 4 meeting, after initial courtesies Minister Bereket noted GoE concerns about U.S. involvement with the media, as highlighted in the Addis Zemen op-eds. While stating that he had had nothing to do with the publication of the Addis Zemen articles, Bereket claimed to have investigated the MF meetings and found the allegations in the op-eds to be based in fact. The Minister stressed that foreign agencies are not permitted to suggest content or topics for coverage to Ethiopian media, and accused USAID of explicitly pushing for Ethiopian media to cover the elections which he called an "unwarranted intervention" into Ethiopian affairs. Furthermore, Bereket elaborated that financial assistance by foreign agents to the media is prohibited by the 2008 Media Law and violates the sovereignty of the Ethiopian state. Finally, Bereket stated that any interaction or associations between the media -- or any Ethiopian entity -- and foreign governments must be approved by the Ethiopian government. He asked the A/DCM and PAO to convey his message to our superiors.

16. (SBU) The A/DCM thanked Bereket for his message but noted that neither USAID nor the U.S. Mission had committed any of the violations that Bereket had detailed. He clarified that the Media Forum, not USAID, called the meeting to discuss election coverage; USAID and other donors simply offered technical assistance and training to facilitate reporting that is accurate, non-partisan and issue-based. When A/DCM noted that all donors at the two meetings in question had stressed that cash transfers were not possible, Bereket's associate Shimelis Kemal, the Director for Media Affairs, stated that even training counts as illegal financial assistance since training costs money. Bereket corrected his colleague noting that "capacity building" is permissible but must be vetted in principle and in substance with the relevant GoE ministry before any such assistance may be commenced. A/DCM noted that UK Embassy PolOff had met with Bereket to brief him on these discussions on engagement with the media, but Bereket asserted he had never discussed such issues with the UK officer. A/DCM further emphasized

that despite Bereket's protest that the GoE had not been consulted, two officials from the National Electoral Board and three representatives from state media -- including the MF's chairman -- participated in the meetings.

17. (SBU) A/DCM suggested that in the future, even when we are working in tandem with other donor partners, we would make sure to inform the GoE directly of our capacity building projects. PAO added that given our many channels of open communication with the GoE, if there are any concerns about USG activities in the country, we can surely find productive ways to discuss them. A/DCM and PAO both noted that the U.S. Mission had been taken aback by the tone of the state-run Addis Zemen articles and the aspersions cast on our intentions. Bereket responded that the U.S. is clearly not used to criticism from others, reminding that the GoE had endured many attacks from the U.S. Congress and NGOs, and had for the most part chosen to ignore them.

18. (U) Post prepared "if asked" guidance coordinated with the Department in response to the Addis Zemen articles and associated coverage. The full text is in para 9 below. The Reporter, a privately-owned publication, used much of the guidance in articles printed in the English and Amharic versions of their paper on September 12 and 13 (English headline: Embassy says concerned about "allegations" on meetings between donors, media).

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Minister Bereket has a reputation for being among the hard-liners in ruling circles. The rhetoric of the Addis Zemen articles, and the references to foreign instigation of the Orange Revolution, matched the tone and content of GoE public commentary in the aftermath of the disputed 2005 elections, as well as private explanationa for the related expulsions of the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and IFES. Embassy contacts have suggested that the vitriolic language and tone of the Amharic language used in the pieces were strikingly similar to past pieces penned by senior ruling party officials. The supposed op-ed pieces underscore GoE sensitivity to any criticism or external involvement associated with democracy and governance issues generally, and specifically the 2010 elections. The apparent warning may succeed in fostering greater media self-censorship and

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caution, the limited reporting of the Mission response notwithstanding. Bereket's concluding threat that "if something like this happens again, we will have to take action" presumably was intended as a threat to us and other donors that support for a more open and inclusive political environment as elections approach will not be welcome. Along with the earlier strong reaction to the Human Rights Report, this incident may portend a much more aggressive response by the GoE more generally to U.S. efforts to promote democratic reform and respect for human rights in Ethiopia. END COMMENT.

MEECE